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ABSTRACT

We live in a time of rising ethnic and racial tensions, great public frustrations, and great demands on school systems. A school district needs to develop a system that allows for the most effective working relationship between the school and the community, that facilitates the solution of problems, and that nurtures the growth of new ways to assist students. Such a system requires (1) the dissemination of information about the schools and the individual student, (2) the personnel to facilitate conflict resolution, and (3) the involvement of the community in the decision making process within the legal structure of the school district. The entire community and each ethnic group should become involved in the care of its children. (Author)

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COOLING OR COPING?
SCHOOL-COMMUNITY TENSIONS

by
Robert R. Spillane

To speak with any authority on a subject so fraught with potential danger as the school and community working in a mixed ethnic and racial area requires a large degree of either chutzpah or hubris- depending, of course, on the ethnic origin of the audience one is addressing. Unfortunately, at my grandmother's knee I absorbed little Yiddish and less Greek.

Indeed, during my own attempts to cope with some of the more explosive situations in our community, I have often found myself feeling like the small boy who watched his father struggling with minor plumbing repairs on a Saturday morning. Father was reduced to four-letter words to express his rage at the usual pitfalls that beset the weekend handyman. The son watched, listened and learned. Asked some time later what he was doing, he replied: "I fixing things. I saying shit."

That was the way I felt a lot during the week we hired the guard dogs. Among New Rochelle's claims to fame is that of having had the most expensive school fire in the United States history when our high school was burned down - not, I am glad to say, as the result of community tensions. Over the course of the years the structure was rebuilt - around the student body. The construction site, as is customary for any construction site around the country, became the scene of constant vandalism and pilferage. We were finally driven to the expedient of guard dogs. These dogs and their trainers were hired to patrol the premises nights and weekends - not, I assure you, during school hours when the student body might be exposed to jaw and fang.

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I had long realized that a school superintendent may expect a violent reaction to almost any action he takes but had not expected to be suddenly seen

as a reincarnation of Bull Connor and Attila the Hun. Apparently guard dogs, even when employed to prevent a $1500 loss a week, are a sure sign of creeping facism. I had as yet, however, offended only fifty percent of the people in town. The remaining half of the population reached boiling point the same week when William Kunstler, the distinguished if controversial lawyer, accepted a student invitation to speak at the High School. New Rochelle, left wing and right wing, was united in condemning the superintendent.

That was a high point, rarely approached since those who applauded the dogs condemned Kunstler, and vice versa. But scarcely a day goes by when I am not responding in some fashion to the criticisms or demands of some portion of the community. New Rochelle is a city which contains representatives of almost all groups. We have rich and we have poor; we have that most resentful of all groups, people - whether blue collar or white collar - who are struggling to bring up families beset by the twin wolves of inflation and under-employment. They cannot afford to join beach clubs or send their children to private nursery schools. They resent equally "those rich people in the North End," and "those people who get all the handouts." The fact that "North End" is understood as a code word for Je[illegible]nd "those people" is a euphemism for Black, translates class bitterness into ethnic hatred. The very existence of a prosperous black middle class guarantees that there will be resentment from black families trapped in the drug ridden housing projects and rat ridden slums of Westchester County. New Rochelle is blessed with diversity - black, white, oriental, Spanish, Italian, Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist. However you choose to classify people, by language, religion or national origin of maternal grandparents, New Rochelle certainly has at least one representative - and more likely a group at that moment picketing my office.

As a nation we are living in a time of heightened ethnic awareness. Mention of a great American dream, the melting pot, is likely to bring the reaction: "Yeah. Better get out of that pot 'fore you get melted." Many groups are busy forging a new sense of racial and ethnic identity - a sense often linked by history with hatred of another group. Any time I am tempted to think that someone else is being over-sensitive or paranoid - (words often used to describe other people's ethnic reactions) - I think about how I feel when I see the streets of Belfast on television. Those shabby row houses and those thin faced children look like 1922 to me. Intellectually I may sympathize with the difficulties of the British government but those soldiers look like Black and Tans to me, and the stories of free Ireland as told by my grandfather and father prejudice my feeling about the British government. Racial and ethnic memories are long.

Sometimes racial memories can be confused as well as long. One day the director of a Prekindergarten Program in our district was visiting one of the classrooms under her supervision. When the time came for outdoor play, fifteen children tried to scramble through the door at the same time. The director remarked: "Those children must learn to wait." She was stopped dead in her tracks by the indignant reply of the black paraprofessional: "No. My people have been waiting for four hundred years."

That answer should serve, however, to remind us that people are not always responding to the immediate situation. Often they are responding to four hundred or five thousand years of oppression. Alternately, they may be reacting to events occurring somewhere else. New Rochelle is very close to New York City. We had a teachers' strike the spring following the last New York City teachers' strike. The issues were totally unrelated - but parents, teachers, paraprofessionals,

students, lined up along the New York City battle lines. Recently, Miss Lebanon was afraid to travel to Puerto Rico to compete in the Miss Universe contest because Japanese had massacred Christian pilgrims in an Israeli airport. We cannot legitimately expect parents or students not to react to events which they believe affect a group with which they identify. In an election year such as this we can expect a heightening of tensions as politicians both local and national exploit fears both real and unreal.

We are living in a time of rising educational aspirations. The country may be full of unemployed Ph.D.s - but college entrance if not college graduation seems to be expected as the ultimate goal for every child who enters the school system. Ethnic groups play the comparison game of percentages of "our children" who achieve this dream - (and the percentage is expected to automatically increase every year or the school system is at fault). At the same time the same kind of percentage game is played with employment opportunities in the school system - whether professional or non-professional. Personnel departments had better be aware of the needs expressed by the quota system. Since the United States seems prepared to go on indefinitely increasing the number of college places available, the first demand is not seen as any particular threat to anybody. The second, however, - getting jobs and matching staff to the ethnic composition of the community, can be seen as threatening by those people who over the years have painfully acquired tenure or seniority. The quota system, to say the least, is controversial. The first great push for black staff in schools occurred at a time when the demand for teachers far exceeded the supply and there was a free flow of Federal money for special programs to introduce new positions. Now we have an oversupply of teachers. The Federal funds are drying up. There will be much

more difficulty in meeting the demands of the black community - or of other community groups which have just begun to realize that they are under-represented. At the same time, the insecurity of those groups which presently have the jobs will greatly lessen their sympathy for community demands.

We also live in a time of enormous public frustration. The great issues that have concerned the nation - the war, poverty, drugs, the black revolution, inflation - have not been solved. It is not surprising that many of these frustrations are vented on the school system since it is both more accessible than most branches of the government - and most directly concerned with the shaping of the future. Parental anxiety about drugs, violence, changing sexual mores is great. At the same time, many of the forces upon which parents have traditionally looked for support in the task of raising their children, such as organized religion, "our friend the policeman," belief in the American Dream, patriotism, have all lost their ancient force. The schools seem to be the only allies left to parents.

A school system is also involved with that part of the community which is not a direct user of its services - the parents of children who attend parochial or private schools, or people whose children have already left school. The elderly woman who has had her bag snatched by an "unidentified youth" or has been frightened by abusive language from a crowd of unruly teenagers, must somehow be persuaded to vote yes (or at least stay home) during the next bond issue, yet she undoubtedly blames the school for these incidents.

Much of my time of administration must therefore be spent in dealing directly with community problems. I must be accessible to an aggrieved parent or a group with a demand. Many of my evenings must be spent speaking and listening to local organizations. Much of the time of principals, other administrators,

teachers, guidance counselors, will be spent in like endeavor. Even more important is the development of a system which allows for the most effective working relationship between schools and community, a system which facilitates the solution of problems, and nurtures the growth of new ways of assisting students.

Not all our attempts at easing community tensions succeed. I recollect one meeting held in Columbus School (which is of course in the heart of the Italian neighborhood). Black-Italian feelings ran high and leaders of both communities were doing their best to lower the temperature. All went well until an unfortunate slip of the tongue occurred. A black spokesman rose, intending to refer to the two groups he saw with large numbers of personnel in the schools as "the Jews and the wasps." However, the meeting broke up when there came from his twisted tongue the phrase: "The Jews and the Wops." I think the statue of Columbus turned to me and said "Sail on."

Well, all we could do was try harder.

The first requirement, it seems to me, for a sound working relationship, is information. We all need to know what kind of a school system we are talking about. A recent survey in a western school system asked parents: "Are the schools doing as well as they can?" Thirty-seven percent of the parents answered yes, 24% answered no, and 38% were undecided. The indecision may have arisen from the imprecision of the question. A parent might well ask: "What the hell are the schools trying to do?" For the last two years we have published "The New Rochelle School Profile," in an attempt to explain what we are doing and how well we are doing it. We try to teach all kinds of things, of course, from "better self-concept" to AP Chemistry, but math and reading are fundamental. The profile document

provides a school by school report for all elementary and secondary schools of reading and math achievement in selected grades, together with educational ability scores, information about the community, number of foster children, A.D.C. cases, etc., and such school factors as level of staff training, percentage of non-English speaking pupils, pupil mobility rate, etc. With this information parents or anyone else in town can get some picture of what it is that our schools are doing.

The introduction states, "The New Rochelle School Profile has been developed for a single important reason: to provide our schools with the information they need to improve. This it will accomplish by strengthening building-by-building accountability to the public, by improving communications between each school and the people it serves, and by providing a common objective basis for identifying problems, setting priorities, recognizing successful programs in individual buildings that can be transplanted to the others, and for reviewing on a continuing schedule the results of our educational efforts.

"There are really no surprises in the report. It has become common knowledge during this decade that pupil performance in urban school districts lags behind national norms. It is also commonly known that not all of the factors which determine the level of achievement in any school building or in any school system are school-controlled or even, technically speaking, school-related. There are financial, political and social forces whose effect on the performance of students and therefore their schools must be taken into account if a true picture of the total learning environment is to be developed.

".....the Profile .. can give us the means to evaluate our schools and to determine where they are succeeding and where they need to be improved." Every

parent's first concern is his own child, and all a child's test scores are available to parents. Some of this information needs interpretation. A guidance counselor who thrusts a graph at a parent with the remark, "Here are Joe's Iowa's," is not being particularly helpful to a father who can only think that his son has never been west of the Hudson. What the hell is he doing with Iowa Basic Skills?

The elementary schools in the district close regularly for parent conferences, in lieu of the sending home of unintelligible report cards. The plan works as a two-way interchange of information between the two people most concerned with the child - but would work better if teachers' colleges could give some courses in how to talk to parents. We still have teachers who state sincerely: "I don't care what color a child is. I treat them all alike." (The colors she uses as examples - green, blue - are rarely encountered in our schools.) She may be right about the way she treats children but she has a long way to go with parents. The class and ethnic differences do become important between parent and teacher. A parent who is much less educated or much more educated than the teacher provides difficulties for the teacher. A warm winning smile does not overcome all language barriers.

In New Rochelle, parents or teachers - or students - who reach an impasse in communications have recourse to the school district ombudsman. This office has been set up to provide a place where people with problems can find accessibility, speedy response and follow through. Requests for help have come in the areas of racial and social tensions; placement, transfer or dismissal of students; student involvement with narcotics; support of parents at meetings involving the disposition of a child; aid to parents and teachers in reaching decisions concerning disruptive students; human relations-training for teachers, students, parents and community groups. The Ombudsman has provided a useful conduit of information to the

administration about community problems and concerns as well as community reactions to innovative programs such as Open Corridor, Mini-Courses, etc. Apart from courses for staff members, the Ombudsman has also worked with such school related groups as PTA and police who are likely to have contact with school students.

I have been talking about the dissemination of information about the existing school system and about helping parent and child find their way through this maze of bureaucracy. It has also been important to involve the community in the decision making process about the schools where their decisions will count. All too often Boards and Superintendents say there will be decision making power (as long as they come up with the correct answers).

New Rochelle has been operating under severe restraints since the 1970-71 school year when we reached our constitutional tax limit. Severe staff cuts had to be made and an urgent need was felt to find out from the New Rochelle community just what it wanted from its schools - where it put its priorities. To do this, a series of redesign conferences was convened. The major redesign conference on May 1, 1971 brought 200 persons together in the high school library. At least as many other persons participated in smaller conferences with the Superintendent and members of the staff over a four week period. It was on the basis of the priorities expressed at these conferences that the school system's basic pattern of redesign was achieved.

Any educational program is most effective when it operates within a framework of support from students, staff and parents. Any program can be implemented best with the concerned, knowledgeable involvement of all these components from as early a date as possible in the planning process. In a suburban community

such as New Rochelle some segments of the community have always been heavily involved in the decision making process of the educational system, whether through representation on the Board of Education, influence wielded through the structure of the PTA, or through more informal contacts. An articulate parent, knowledgeable about the way in which the education system works has usually found relatively easy access to teachers, principals, or the Superintendent. For a large segment of the parent population, often the poor, the black, the non-English speaking, the relatively uneducated, a chance to actively influence the system which educates their children has been less easy.

It has often been our state and federally funded programs which have provided the vehicle and the process for opening the way for parents to become active as decision makers in the areas of accountability of staff to programs, evaluation, curriculum development, staff selection, and finances throughout the developmental and operational stages of the projects. The process has not been easy or painless. We have had our rubber stamp committees. The opening wedge for real community involvement is usually driven from the community side. Some members of the administrative staff suffered under the misapprehension that "community" meant "Black" until the night the twelve Presidents of the United Societies of Italian Americans arrived en masse at a Title I meeting. The only female Italian president happened to have the name of Mrs. Shapiro, which delighted us all. None of us was quite prepared for the strong Italian-Black coalition which developed after a series of meetings which seemed sometimes on the edge of violence and always threatened to destroy the central administrative staff through sheer exhaustion. (The chief characteristic of community participants, whether Black or Italian, was their ability to talk until one o'clock in the morning.)

All of this was immensely time consuming. Months were spent in reorganizing the Title I Committee on a democratically elected base, - in working out processes for interviewing applicants for jobs, in learning how to interview.

Most important of all was the setting of all this new participation within the legal framework of a functioning school district. After all, local control of education through a locally appointed or elected Board of Education was always intended to ensure community control. In New Rochelle we were not dealing with a monstrosity the size of the New York City school system. New Rochelle has a population of about 75,000. It's somewhat easier for citizens to make their needs known.

What we have been involved in has been a deepening of the sensitivity of the schools towards all children and all parents, combined with a greater participation by community representatives in specific details of the running of the schools. Community groups have interviewed job applicants from superintendent and principals to student aides in summer programs. At the same time the ultimate legal responsibility of the Board of Education for hiring and firing has been more clearly redefined. Community groups have designed and evaluated programs - but in close collaboration with professionals - and again with the ultimate responsibility for the implementation of such programs resting with the Board of Education. And the citizens must clearly know this before they become involved.

The next step in the development of the working relationship between school and community would seem to be a thinking through of the responsibilities we place on the schools. We expect the schools to bear the burden of integrating a society which will not alter its segregated housing patterns, where the only integration takes place 9-3 when schools are in session. We expect the schools to guard our

children against the drugs our police cannot keep out of our streets. We expect our schools to provide the health services society will not provide. We expect school social workers to patch up the lives torn by the poverty our government cannot end. We expect our schools to inculcate a system of morality that parents and clergy cannot sell.

Our last school year ended with violence at one of our junior high schools. The outbreak had been preceded by indications within the school of the coming storm; it had been preceded by riots at local movie theaters, by incident after incident on local streets and in shopping centers. The time has come to stop blaming the schools for the violence in the streets. Rather we could blame the community for what happens in classrooms.

The schools cannot become the only community agency concerned with the young. If the old institutions cannot help we need to devise new ones Perhaps the new ethnic awareness will lead each group to the realization that its most precious heritage is its children, to the construction of new forms of community support for individual families, to the designing of new ways of nurturing and protecting adolescents. For ... to quote Ebony, August, 1972, ...

"We must learn how to love, to protect, to cherish, our young, our old, our own."

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